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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE RED CROSS MOVEMENT

BY H. ADDINGTON BRUCE

FEW phases of the Great War are more significant from a psychological or sociological point of view than the sudden blossoming of the American Red Cross into a national organization of stupendous magnitude. Three years ago the Red Cross had a membership of only twenty-two thousand. Today it has twenty-three million members, and, as I write, it is about to begin a "drive" expected to double, and more than double, its present enrollment. According to an official estimate recently given me, five million people are now working in Red Cross establishments on both sides of the Atlantic, and perhaps fifteen million more are assisting at their homes in Red Cross activities. Besides all of which, the American people have contributed upwards of three hundred million dollars to the support of the Red Cross since the United States became a participant in the war. Here, assuredly, is a remarkable social phenomenon that raises an interesting problem—the problem of explaining adequately this marvellous response to the Red Cross appeal, and of evaluating its significance correctly.

One solution, of course, that lies ready at hand is to see in it an unusually impressive instance of the power of "suggestion" and "psychic contagion." On this theory, in order to understand the amazing spread of the Red Cross movement it would only be necessary to postulate the persuasiveness of an exceptionally well organized propaganda, acting on the imitative tendency common to mankind. And suggestion was undeniably the immediate dynamic factor. But this leaves untouched the deeper problem of the peculiar effectiveness of suggestion in this particular case. Why did the suggestion to give and to toil for the Red Cross "take," and

why did it take so hard? Responsivity to a suggested idea does not depend solely on the skill with which that idea is suggested, though many people seem to think that it does.

Suggestion, in fact, is popularly regarded as an almost magic force, of irresistible potency when rightly applied. Actually there must always be present, on the part of the suggestee, an ardent, however subconscious, desire to respond to a given suggestion. Otherwise suggestion, no matter how deft its presentation, will beat forever against a stone wall of negativism. This, incidentally, explains why suggestion often fails in the treatment of functional nervous and mental maladies, a field of action in which as a rule it is notably efficacious. When, as frequently happens, nervous or mental symptoms give their victim certain advantages—such as being a centre of sympathetic interest and attention—which would be lost if relief from the symptoms were gained, a subconscious desire to cling to them may prove altogether too strong for suggestion to overcome. When, on the other hand, a favoring desire is present and dominant, no great skill in the applying of suggestion is required to secure the end in view. In the present instance, obviously, the suggested idea, "Give to the Red Cross, work for the Red Cross, sacrifice for the Red Cross," must have accorded with deepseated and intense desires. If this had not been the case the systematized campaigns of suggestion in behalf of the Red Cross could never have been so abundantly fruitful.

As the figures cited indicate, all classes of American society have responded, with money and personal service. Men of the highest ability in professional and business life have volunteered without pay to direct the workings of the Red Cross organization. Women of wealth and social prestige, hitherto leading sheltered and perhaps not altogether profitable lives, have in the service of the Red Cross labored without thought of self, displaying powers of endurance which none suspected in them. Many, indeed, have left homes of luxury, cheerfully to undergo privation, to risk, and not infrequently to lay down, life itself. And when undivided service could not be given to the Red Cross, hundreds of thousands of people have willingly superimposed Red Cross work on the routine tasks of their regular occupations. After a day of strenuous effort, business men, housewives, clerks, shop-girls, factory workers, men and women in every walk of life, have devoted their precious evening hours to labor for

the Red Cross. Small wonder that I have more than once heard it said, "To become actively identified with the Red Cross is almost a religion in America today." Giving emphasis to this statement is the yearning anxiety shown by some to have their dead as well as themselves included in Red Cross membership. Thus a Massachusetts mother writes to the executive of a Red Cross chapter:

The three living members of my family—my husband, son, and self—are Red Cross members, and I long to enlist in the memory of my other lovely son, who, I cannot say that he is dead, but just away, for in my heart he still lives. I think of him faring on, as dear, in my love up there, as my love while here. I think of him in the same loving way. If he was with his dear ones now he would wish to do his "bit," for he was a loyal boy. Please accept, "in the memory of my dear Ralph," the one dollar, for humanity's sake. Then I can put the other red cross on my banner, to make the number complete. For the circle is not broken, although the empty chair is in my home.

"For humanity's sake" is in truth the motive which most people would advance if asked to state their reason for supporting the Red Cross by money or by service, or by both money and service. But this hardly goes to the heart of the matter. The Red Cross, remember, is not of recent origin. It was founded as long ago as 1864, and organized in the United States in 1881. After various vicissitudes it was re-organized as a national American institution in 1905, with the President of the United States at its head. Again and again it has demonstrated, at home and abroad, in time of war and in time of peace, its superlative value as an agency for the saving of life and the relief of suffering. But as recently as 1915 Miss Mabel T. Boardman could state, in her history of the Red Cross:

As yet this national association of ours, which belongs to the country and to the people, is in its infancy. Lusty and vigorous it is true, but lacking still the size and development it must attain before it is a worthy representative of these United States of America. It has twenty-two thousand members. Eighteen hundred thousand men, women, and children of Japan constitute the membership of the Japanese Red Cross. Hundreds of thousands manifest their love of country in other lands by adhesion to the ranks of their national association. Our American Red Cross has less than a million dollar endowment fund. The permanent endowment of the Japanese Red Cross is nearly thirteen million dollars. The Russian society before the present war had a reserve capital of nineteen million dollars. And the funds of several other European associations are far more than those of our own. In a country of such wealth, of such patriotism and humanity

as this, the American people cannot allow their Red Cross to remain without a just endowment. They give with the utmost liberality to local charities, to hospitals, to universities and colleges; but they have yet to learn to express the love for their country by their gifts to the organization which stands as the embodiment of patriotism both in war and peace.

The lesson would certainly seem to have been learned since these words were written. And the stimulus to the learning, needless to say, was America's shift from neutrality to belligerency. This alone, however, would not suffice to explain the astonishing zeal forthwith shown for the formerly neglected Red Cross. To explain this, special circumstances have to be taken into consideration, not the least important being the educative influence of the events of the first two years of the Great War—the years of America's neutrality—in appealing with unprecedented force to the humanitarian impulses of American men and women, and at the same time in giving them a lively consciousness of the imminence of the peril in which the world, their country, and they themselves were placed by the German onslaught. By the time the United States got into the war, Americans did not have to be told that this was no ordinary conflict between nations. They knew that on its outcome depended not merely the safety of America, but the safety of civilization itself. That is to say, the instincts alike of self-preservation and of race preservation, the egocentric and the gregarious instincts, were so aroused as to make action of some sort imperative on every American.

It is a biological and psychological truism that trouble results when any instinct is thwarted in finding adequate expression. This is peculiarly true of the gregarious instinct, in which such qualities as altruism, patriotism, conscience, and the sense of duty are rooted. When, in consequence of any circumstance that causes an overdevelopment of the egocentric at the expense of the gregarious instinct, people lead uncommonly self-centered lives, they are invariably discontented, restless, and unhappy, and may even be harried into conditions of serious ill-health. Many, if not all, of the functional disorders so much in evidence in the modern world, are now known to be the product of an undue repression of the gregarious instinct, and the experienced physician makes it a point to try to guide nervous sufferers into activities that will give this instinct free play. This is why the so-called "sym-

pathy cure " is so efficacious in numerous cases of nervousness. The self-centred neurotic who can be induced to engage in charitable or other altruistic activities, finds relief through altruism from his symptoms simply because he thereby gives expression to the gregarious instinct that has tormented him into nervousness as a punishment for his failure to give it expression at all. Man is so built that he must have the consciousness of being of service to his fellow-man, else he will be driven to eccentricities of thought and behavior injurious to himself and to society. And the necessity for this consciousness is intensified in time of war or other great crisis, in proportion as the gravity of the crisis carries with it a realization that the nation's future is at stake. That is to say, when the war is a little war, the compulsion of the gregarious instinct is far less keenly felt than when the war is a big one. Men can more readily go about their ordinary affairs, without being troubled by the feeling that they should be personally striving to insure the winning of the war.

The war that began in the summer of 1914 was not a little war. It was a big war. In fact, it speedily made itself recognized as the biggest of all wars. The stirring of the gregarious instinct was correspondingly strong, and consequently there was an imperative need for directive action that would enable all to satisfy this stirring. In England, as Trotter has recently pointed out, the need in question was at first not properly appreciated. Large sections of the community, incapable of actual military service, were given neither guidance nor opportunity to contribute directly to the national defense, with consequences concerning which Trotter justly observes:

It must surely be clear that in a nation engaged in an urgent struggle for existence, the presence of a large class who are as sensitive as any to the call of the herd, and yet cannot respond in any active way, contains very grave possibilities. The only response to that relentless calling that can give peace is in service; if that be denied, restlessness, uneasiness, and anxiety must necessarily follow. To such a mental state are very easily added impatience, discontent, exaggerated fears, pessimism, and irritability. It must be remembered that large numbers of such individuals were persons of importance in peace time, and retain a great deal of their prestige under the social system we have decided to maintain, although in war time they are obviously without function. This group of idle and flustered parasites has formed a nucleus from which have proceeded some of the many outbursts of disunion which have done so much to prevent this country from developing her resources with smoothness and continuity. It is not sug-

gested that these eruptions of discontent are due to any kind of disloyalty; they are the result of defective morale, and bear all the evidences of coming from persons whose instinctive response to the call of the herd has been frustrated and who, therefore, lack the strength and composure of those whose souls are uplifted by a satisfactory instinctive activity. Moral instability has been characteristic of all the phenomena of disunion we are now considering.

In our own country manifestations of a frustrating of the gregarious instinct have not been entirely absent during the war. But they have been less in evidence and less detrimental than in England, for the reason that in our country, from the day we became involved in the colossal struggle for world freedom, guidance and opportunity were given enabling the people as a whole to respond to "the call of the herd" by becoming active war workers and war helpers. To this end the signal favor shown the Red Cross by the Government, and the official stressing of the value of the Red Cross as a war time organization, were important steps—steps so important that they must be regarded as amounting almost to a stroke of genius. For the Red Cross was an agency admirably calculated to afford not only universal, but also thoroughly satisfying, expression of the gregarious instinct. More than this, it was an agency with which the people were thoroughly familiar and which they already held in high esteem.

If, in the pre-war period, they had shown no burning ardor to enlist under the banner of the Red Cross, this was not because they were at that time unaware of its worth. It was because, to be quite frank, the pre-war period was one in which the egocentric instinct was somewhat overdeveloped—as indicated, for example, by the prevalence not alone of functional nervous and mental disorders, but also of vice, crime, and insanity, all of which in the last analysis are social evils born of an abnormal egocentricism. But though the egocentric instinct then was undoubtedly dominant, the gregarious still had enough vitality to function under stress, and any local, national, or extra-national calamity brought forth prompt and convincing proof of this. Again and again, as occasion arose, the gregarious instinct had thus functioned through the Red Cross, which consequently was definitely associated in the popular mind with the relief of suffering. It was no new, unknown, untried organization. It had behind it a long and honorable record

of service. Its very symbol—the cross—was itself linked with the noblest traditions and sublimest aspirations of mankind. The happy accident which led to the choosing of this symbol—a desire to compliment Switzerland, where the first Red Cross conference was held in 1864—must be accounted one of the most providential of accidents, from a psychological point of view. No symbol could more surely appeal to the best in the people of Christendom.

With the history of the Red Cross what it was, with the special endorsement it had received from the war-making Government, and with the gregarious instinct aroused in America as it had never been before, we need no longer wonder at the sudden and nationwide enthusiasm shown for the Red Cross. “Suggestion” and “psychic contagion” had a truly fertile field in which to work. There were no contrary ideas to be dislodged, no opposing desires to be overcome. Excepting in persons of superlative self-absorption, the gregarious had for the time complete dominance over the ego-centric. “How can I serve?” was the question consciously or subconsciously foremost in virtually everybody’s mind. “Join the Red Cross,” was one almost self-evident answer. Under the conjoint influence of instinct and of organized campaigning in behalf of the Red Cross, it became an answer, as we know, translated into affirmative, joyfully co-operative action by millions of men and women.

The psychology of the Red Cross movement is thus, after all, comparatively simple, based as it is in human elementals. But the fact of its simplicity should not mask from us its tremendous importance in relation to what may be called racial dynamics. If, after peace has been fully restored, the recently developed enthusiasm for the Red Cross is allowed to die down, if the men and women who have so generously given to, and so devotedly toiled for, the Red Cross, are permitted to revert to the self-centred modes prevalent before the war, then America will have let slip a golden opportunity to lay surer her foundations for the future. The gregarious instinct, the instinct which bids all men strive for the common good, may not need to function so intensely after the war, but there can be no doubt that it ought to function just as continuously. It ought to function, too, with much more intensity than it commonly did in the days that preceded the spiritual awakening forced on the world by the war. The class hatreds which have wrought such destruction in Russia

and elsewhere are an echo of those materialistic days, and their extension to still other countries must be expected if the gregarious instinct atrophy once more. In the Red Cross we now have an institution whose activities make directly for mass as contrasted with class solidarity. To keep the Red Cross in constant and vigorous operation should become an object of national concern and national planning.

From the viewpoint of individual as well as of national well-being, maintenance of the Red Cross in energetic activity is also much to be desired. As already mentioned, failure to give adequate expression to an instinct breeds trouble, and in particular breeds nervous strain. Life begins to seem "stale, flat, and unprofitable," and unless the thwarted instinct contrives to express itself in some way, disorders of feeling and of conduct develop. Our Freudian friends have been at great pains to make clear to us the mischief which ensues when the sex instinct is perpetually baulked, denied expression even through what the Freudians term "sublimation." The gregarious instinct is as imperious in its demands, as vengeful when persistently and absolutely repressed. Urging men to be of service, to lead lives productive of good to the race, at all times and not in war time only, those who remain deaf to its urging must pay a penalty of some kind. When, however, its demands are heeded, a compensatory feeling of satisfaction is gained, and more than this, a loosening of energy which until then had been unavailable.

This accounts for the remarkable "staying powers" unexpectedly displayed by so many Red Cross workers during the past four years. It accounts also for the improved health and increased happiness so many have found after taking up Red Cross work. The anxious restlessness, the feeling of being "sick of things," the chronic dissatisfaction they have been experiencing, oppress them no more. And this even when the Red Cross duties imposed on them have been arduous, unpleasant, perhaps of a character that would ordinarily have been repellant to them. The secret is that through the Red Cross they have been enabled to give to the gregarious instinct the expression it failed to find in their lives before the war. The mere knowledge that one is actually of use in the world is itself an energy developer of the first order. When to this is added knowledge that one is of use in race preservation through the conquest of disease and the alleviation of pain, energy may be developed in almost incredible degree.

Obviously, ample scope for Red Cross effort will remain after the last war victim has been succored. Before the war, for that matter, the Red Cross was doing not a little humanitarian work day in and day out, notably in the way of nursing, co-operating in the prevention of industrial accidents, and promoting health education among the people. This work and kindred effort should now be intensified and extended, for the sake both of those among our millions who need to be helped and of those who will benefit by sharing in the helping. It would in truth be a sad mistake—I am tempted to say, a crime against the nation—if after the war the Red Cross were permitted to fade to a mere shadow of its present splendid self.

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